

Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice

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The role of drawing in the regeneration of urban spaces

Keywords

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urban regeneration
social housing
embodied practice
phenomenology
charcoal
graphite powder
documenting London

Abstract

The aim of my practice is to witness and record the contested regeneration process taking place at the Elephant and Castle, specifically the site of the former Heygate social housing estate. The official representations of urban transformation are visually packaged to show perfect visions of the future – my drawing is used as a method of critical analysis and to challenge these representations. Working in sketchbooks onsite and in the studio the drawings create a timeline of the destruction and rupture taking place in the urban landscape, critically engaging with the regeneration process and what it means.

My practice-led Ph.D. research is about documenting the changing nature of Elephant and Castle in southeast London. I draw on location, compiling notational sketches and observations using a soft 6b pencil in an A6 sketchbook. I then use this information to create much larger studio-based

1. drawings, some of which are collages, using charcoal and graphite powder. The materials are layered
 2. to incorporate elements of specific urban history. My theoretical methodology engages with Merleau-
 3. Ponty's phenomenological notion of embodiment.

4. Many aspects of urban regeneration have been overlooked. My intention has been to draw these
 5. spaces and critically analyse urban regeneration through my peripatetic, embodied practice. My
 6. primary case study is the contested regeneration of Elephant and Castle and the disappearance of
 7. public land and the loss of social housing. The act and action of my drawing is a means of experienc-
 8. ing and embodying the post-war historical legacy of the site.

9. I made the decision not to engage with the official developers as it felt like an act of complicity
 10. with the privatization of the land. I sought out aerial viewpoints and locations at ground level that
 11. would allow me to view visually what was taking place and survey the daily changes undisturbed.
 12. The panoramic view in *The Lost Estate* (Figure 1) depicts the cleared land of the former Heygate
 13. social housing estate and shows the proximity of the City of London, and hence the reason for the
 14. regeneration. The demolition of the estate and the violent reconfiguring of the landscape by mechan-
 15. ical and physical human effort were dramatic and overwhelmingly sensory. The inert land had been
 16. home to thousands of people and I wanted to create an image that would reflect this. The rooftop of
 17. a seven-storey student hall of a residence provided the best vantage point. The sensations of the
 18. excavated landscape and the changing city views facilitated my need to experiment with expressive
 19. mark making.

20. Two sheets of A1 cartridge paper are joined with tape and pinned to my studio wall and I draw
 21. initially using thin sticks of willow charcoal. Gesture and movement are important as I stand and
 22. draw. I block out large areas very quickly working across the surface of the sheet. Using my location
 23. sketches and memory the recalled image emerges through expressive gestures. I repeatedly visit the
 24. site to look again and gather further visual information and to accrue detail. By drawing I am remem-
 25. bering and recounting what I have seen by moving in and out of the landscape. As I complete the
 26. drawing, when I feel I have reconstructed all that I have seen and felt, I use charcoal pencils, or
 27. compressed charcoal to add line and detail. Deanna Petherbridge suggests charcoal has many affini-
 28. ties with construction and excavation and this connects directly with many of the themes inherent
 29. within globally driven regeneration, 'significantly, the French term for rubbing-out, *arrachage*, implies
 30. snatching or uprooting' (2010:138). Moreover, charcoal leaves traces and under drawings, it records
 31. its own history. In *The Lost Estate* I have also added the diagrammatic signage of the Heygate estate
 32. using orange rectangles, cut out from paper. The colour was chosen for its vibrancy and association
 33. with the high-visibility jackets worn by the builders who appeared on site. While drawing several
 34. distortions took place, most notably the tilting horizon, I was not aware of this when drawing but
 35. have incorporated these inaccuracies into my process. The tilting horizon seems to symbolize the
 36. pull and force of the financial centre of the city, refocusing the eye on the empty land of the housing



Figure 1: Howard Read, (2015–16) The lost Estate. Charcoal and collage on paper, 140cm x 60cm. © Howard Read.

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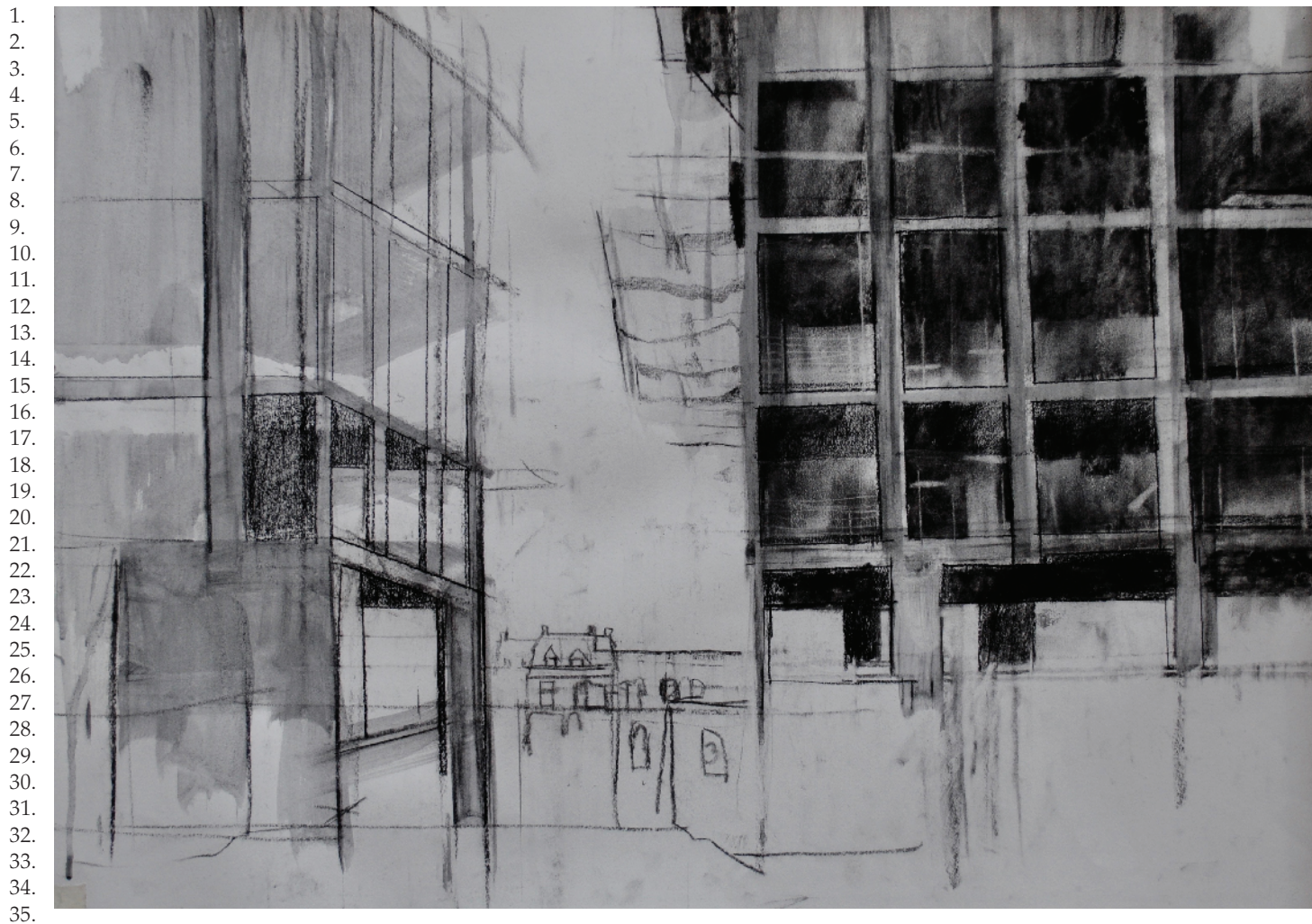


Figure 2: Howard Read, (2016) South Gardens. Charcoal and graphite powder on paper, 59.4 x 84.10cm. © Howard Read.

estate and its value. The combination of the charcoal drawing, overlaid with the modernist housing plan, is intended to unite past and present and show the welfare state ethos that has been lost. The mounds of rubble on the lower left hand side of the drawing are the last visible remains of the estate. The final drawing does not represent a purified vision of the London imaginary but its alluvial, sedimented history.

South Gardens (Figure 2) is a view of one of the new development blocks, situated on the empty land depicted in Figure 1. The view is from ground level looking upwards and the scale of the construction sits uneasily with the traditional Victorian terraced street behind. The drips and spillage seeping off the lower edges of the drawing are a mixture of graphite powder and acrylic retarder, thinned with water. It is the first added layer in the accretion of the drawing and the marks are at odds with the vertical luxury the buildings are intended to represent. Using a brush I have applied the graphite liquid to suggest the rawness of poured concrete. The solidity of the emerging structure on the right-hand side, and its fortress like upper floors is juxtaposed with the linear astringency of the structure on the left, suggesting the inevitable erosion and dilapidation that will occur over time. It is this stage in the construction process, when a building has no architectural embellishments, I find most revealing. The dark, interior spaces are drawn with compressed charcoal and give no hint of being inhabited. The emerging structures of the buildings resemble the ruins they will become.

My studio-based drawings are the antithesis of the linear and controlled drawings of the planners and architects. My visual understanding of regeneration is expressive and gestural, mirroring the cycle of demolition and construction. The dynamics of urban regeneration and the loss of publicly owned land and social housing are the driving intentions behind bearing witness to the regeneration at the Elephant and Castle and my drawing process. Reflectively itemizing each phase of my drawing procedure, which is subjective and derived from intuition, has been of critical importance to my practice-led research. My drawing actions had previously become professionally naturalized, and so unrealized. The critical probing and evaluation of my process has applied directly to my studio drawings. My practice-led research has emphasized the importance of looking without drawing and then looking through drawing.

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